

Contemplation

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Date: 06 March 2016

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[0 : 00] Today's Old Testament lesson comes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 30, verses 1 through 18. Stubborn children, declares the Lord, who carry out a plan but not mine, and who make an alliance but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin, who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt, therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.

For though his officials are at Zoan and his envoys reach Hames, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace.

An oracle on the beasts of Negev, through a land of trouble and anguish, from where come the lioness and the lion, the adder and the flying fiery serpent, they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people that cannot profit them.

Egypt's help is worthless and empty, therefore I have called her Rahab who sits still. And now go, write it before them on a tablet and ascribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

For they are rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord, who say to the seers, do not see, and to the prophets, do not prophesy to us what is right.

[1 : 38] Speak to us smooth things, prophecy illusions. Leave the way, turn aside from the path. Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, thus says the Holy One of Israel, because you despise this word and trust in the oppression and perverseness and rely on them, therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly in an instant, and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found, with which to take fire from the hearth or dip up water out of the cistern.

For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you were unwilling, and you said, no, we will flee upon horses.

Therefore you shall flee away, and we will ride upon swift steeds. Therefore your pursuers shall be swift. A thousand shall flee at the threat of one. At the threat of five you shall flee till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill.

Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you. And therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all those who wait for him.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. About a month ago, many of us in this room saw a film at the National Gallery of Art by Laura Hinson called Many Beautiful Things.

[3 : 24] And it's a documentary about Lilius Trotter, a 19th century British painter who left a career that would have brought fame and fortune in order to follow God's calling on our life to be a missionary to the poor and downtrodden in North Africa.

In that departure to Africa, she says that holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling. Holiness, not safety, is the end of our calling.

That's been a refrain for us these last few weeks in this season of Lent. Holiness. This sermon series is called The Habits of Holiness. We're looking at practices that would build and nurture holiness and virtue within us.

The first week, we looked at submission. What does it mean to live under the authority of Christ's lordship? The second sermon we heard was about scripture.

And what does it mean that the Bible is God-breathed? Last week, we looked at contentment and Paul's statement. How he has learned in whatever situation to be content.

[4 : 40] This week, these three themes come together quite beautifully in this 30th chapter of Isaiah that we heard Megan read earlier. We're going to see two problems that Judah had.

Self-reliance and a refusal to listen to God's voice. Self-reliance or really failure to rely on God. And a refusal to listen to God's voice.

We're going to see how those two faults are shared by us. We have those same faults and sin tendencies. And then lastly, we're going to look at two practices to help us overcome those problems.

It would be kind of a black comedy if we're going to talk about listening to God's voice and we weren't to pray to ask God to help us with that.

So let's do that right now. Amen. God, thank you for bringing us here.

[5 : 48] Thank you for guiding us. Thank you that you don't leave us without a knowledge of yourself or how to relate to you as our Father or to submit to you as our Lord.

So we would ask your guidance today. Help us to hear your word. Help us to lay aside all of our pride and arrogance and our presuppositions and help us to really, truly hear what you have to say to us tonight.

And not just tonight, Lord, but every day of our lives. And in hearing you, trust you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. So here in Isaiah 30, we find ourselves towards the end of the 8th century BC. And many years earlier, before this account, Israel had split into two kingdoms.

The northern kingdom, which had kept the name Israel, has already been conquered by Assyria, and the Israelites have been hauled off into exile. The southern kingdom, now called Judah, finds itself a vassal state of Assyria because of the actions and decisions of the previous king Ahaz.

[7 : 07] Ahaz's son, the current king, Hezekiah, and by all accounts, a pretty good guy, he wishes to be free of Assyria, and so he seeks protection from Egypt to the south.

Egypt, as we heard, was a worthless ally. In battle with Assyria, they would be routed just 100 miles from their home, while Assyria, 600 miles from their home, just completely routed them.

God even mocks Egypt in verse 7. It's pretty funny. He calls her Rahab who sits still. In other words, Judah wasn't relying on Egypt, the glorious, beautiful, powerful queen of ages past.

Judah was relying on Egypt, the invalid grandmother who sits at home watching Judge Judy and Fox News all day. I'm pretty sure.

Ironically, and foolishly, Judah is going back to her old slave master to ensure her freedom. But that isn't what made Egypt the poor choice. Egypt was a poor choice because Judah was to rely on God, and God only for her protection, and safety, and salvation.

[8 : 18] Judah was to seek God's guidance instead of weaving her own web, as the language here could be literally translated in verse 1. Here in verses 1 and 2, we find the biblical insistence that God's people be guided by God's revelation.

Ah, stubborn children who carry out a plan, but not mine. Who make an alliance, but not with my spirit. Who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my direction.

The last bit here in verse 2 could be translated literally, you did not inquire for my mouth. You did not inquire for my mouth. This might lead some of you to recall the sermon from two weeks ago.

Tommy preached from 1 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 16, which says, all scripture is God-breathed. Well, I mean, that idea wasn't new to Paul.

God here is affirming it many hundreds of years earlier. God's revelation isn't static or dead. His revelation is his mouth.

[9 : 28] And it comes to us by his Holy Spirit. And in that sermon we heard two weeks ago, we heard also 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 21, which says, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And here in Isaiah 30, it's the prophet Isaiah that is being carried along, delivering God's message. But Judah wouldn't receive it. They would refuse it. As a matter of fact, in verses 9 and 10, God notes how not only is Judah unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord, but they were telling Isaiah to say something else.

The people had wanted Isaiah to change his message. They wanted him to lead them astray from the Holy One of Israel. In chapter 6 of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah has a vision.

A vision of God and his temple. Glorious. Breathtaking. Indescribable. So holy and indescribable that Isaiah could only describe the hem of his robe.

And Isaiah had devoted his whole career to communicating this message of God's holiness. This beautiful, amazing vision. But Judah wouldn't see it.

[10:48] They didn't want to see it. They wanted Isaiah to just shut up about it. And instead, communicate smooth, affirming things.

And not of a God whose splendor demanded the impossible things of them. Does that sound familiar? Yes. It does.

Right? That's us. 2,700 years later. That's us. I know, because it's me. It's me. Now, if Judah were to listen to this strange man, they would have to alter their view of God and their way of responding to him.

But as Flannery O'Connor wrote, the truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it. The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.

So let's summarize Judah's problems and see how they apply to us. Okay? The first, in the face of trial and danger, Judah devises their own plan to get help instead of seeking God.

[11:54] And that's us. Right? I mean, just think back this week, this month, when an issue arose at work or at home or in your relationships and you had to figure out a solution.

Did you ask God for help? Was he the first person you asked? Well, you might say, I'm a surgeon and should I ask God for a magical air to show me where to cut?

You know, where the patient is dying on the table? Or like, I'm a musician and should I just wait for God to show me every note on the page to play? Is that the kind of reliance you're talking about? No, no.

That's not what I'm talking about. But this is an air trombone, by the way, if you're wondering. So, what scripture teaches, cover to cover, is that God's children live in utter dependence on their father.

Throughout a day, God's children have a spiritual posture of kneeling. Not physical, but a spiritual posture of kneeling, hands up, palms up, in need of God's provision.

[12:59] The posture simply says, help. Help me. Have mercy on me. Personally, when I get into a bind, if I remember to do this, I say what's called a Jesus prayer, an ancient prayer that helps us focus on God and his helping us, which says, Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And I say it a lot. But often, I don't go to that. You know, I get nervous pretty much every time I play music in front of people. That would mean on Sundays when I lead worship.

And this is, I've always had this problem. And I remember once being asked by a friend, like, what do you do when you get nervous? How do you get through that? My response was, well, I just, hmm, what do I do?

I just rely on the things that I've practiced, things that I've learned in my training. And then he asked, do you pray? And I realized I, I didn't most of the time.

I realized that I'm much more of an orphan than a son of the Father. At least that's how I behave. An orphan who relies on his instinct, the strategies, strategies and coping measures he's learned on the streets, never fully trusts anyone, even after being received into a loving family and given parents who truly love him.

[14:24] We see overtones of this in verse one, right? God says, aha, stubborn children. So that's Judah's first problem, self-reliance.

And Judah's other problem is that they don't listen to their father's voice. We've touched on this.

They either ignore God's voice or because of their pride and arrogance, they twist his words to support their own agenda, to support their own systems of belief, or to prevent God from interfering with the things that they desire.

So what should have Israel done? Verse 15 says, For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in returning and rest you shall be saved.

In quietness and in trust shall be your strength. Again, he's addressing posture. Returning means repentance.

And once we've returned to the Father's presence, we become quiet and still. And in that silence, God gives to us of himself.

[15:41] We find strength. faith. So what does that mean for us today? Does it mean we literally need to find times of silence and solitude?

Well, yes. Yep, of course. And I think that's exactly what it means. And Jesus knew how critical it was, too. He knew how critical it was to find times of silence and solitude.

And if the Son of God, the Son, who had known intimacy with the Father in a perfect dance of never-ending love, if he needed to find time alone with the Father to be intimate, in silence and solitude, how much more do we?

Right? The world is so noisy. You know this. It's noisier than it's ever been. Audio, visually, informationally, we're drowning in information.

We seek it on our smartphones as soon as we wake up and just before we go to sleep. As we walk on the street or wait in a line, a ubiquitous din of words resulting in an epidemic of numbness.

[16:55] And I think you've felt that. I have. And for whatever reason, we prefer the noise because it's so much more preferable to the alternatives the hard work of recognizing the true aesthetic beauty that surrounds us, the hard work of empathy, recognizing that every human soul we encounter is both made in the image of God and suffers the weight of a broken humanity, the hard work of living with our own thoughts and feelings and neuroses and hurt.

And there's an alternative that's more frightening than the three of those. and that's plain old silence. Silence is frightening. I know this because I watch science fiction.

I really don't reference science fiction in every sermon. I know this because I remember cutting the science fiction reference from my last sermon. Anyway, bear with me. Science fiction has a way of tapping into our fears through the enemies it projects.

Now some of you may remember the Borg from Star Trek Next Generation. If you remember when the Borg was created it was at the end of the Cold War, right? The Borg was an enemy that was likened to the communist state in which individuality and self-identity is eradicated and all members are in complete service to the collective, right?

It's a very Cold War fear. Now one thing that was supposed to be frightening about that enemy is that if you were assimilated you could never keep the voices and thoughts of the other individuals out of your head.

[18:31] Nowadays that's so much more preferable than the alternative. And the alternative is the antagonist in season six of Doctor Who. Anybody know who that is?

The silence! Right? The silence. Frightening. And the members of the silence look like that guy from The Scream you know that expressionist painting that guy? Like that's what's frightening.

It's just silence. It's tapped into our fear and silence represents our deepest fears. Who knows what monsters and devils we would find in a vacuum of sound waves in the space of our own minds and hearts.

But silence is exactly what God prescribes for his people. For this reason we need to hear from God. We need to hear from God. Jesus often said he who has ears to hear let him hear.

Our minister of care and community Melissa Litwiller met with our core group leaders this past Wednesday night and she made this profound point. If our God is a God who speaks and we truly believe that then in order to hear that voice we need to offer God the hospitality of silence.

[19:45] Isn't that beautiful? The hospitality of silence. Silence is the space in which we welcome God to speak. Soren Kierkegaard said the first thing the unconditional condition the very first thing that must be done is create silence.

Bring about silence. God's word cannot be heard in the hullabaloo. Create silence. The kind of silence we need for listening is not that momentary silence of turning your attention to someone. It's much more than that. It's the act of self-emptying and bringing our whole selves before God. It's not a stupid silence. It's more a question of mobilizing our knowledge and our experience and making them fluid and lively so that they will serve the attention.

So that they will serve the attention instead of replacing it. Now many of us can be good at reading the Bible but silence is the space in which the Bible reads me.

It's the place where we put to death our pride and we truly listen. One author writes this, reading these pages that form the Bible written and transmitted by men of the past thus becomes listening to the voice of God in them.

[21:04] A process that requires a particular attention, vigilance, and availability. This attention, this vigilance, this availability are contrary to the hardened pride in which I presume to know better than others what they're saying and what they mean and better than God how he may act and how he may reveal himself.

Right? Just an issue of pride and humility. Silence is a posture of humility before a God who speaks. and we've talked about Judah's two problems.

Self-reliance and failing to hear God's voice. And we've explored how we wrestle with the same things. And I hope I've made a compelling case for the need to rely on God and for the need to seek silence but I've prayed a lot about this sermon.

I walked down the streets of Mount Pleasant actually saying Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And I feel like I need to present real concrete applications on how to rely on God and how to hear his voice.

Habits of holiness that would deepen our trust in God by remembering God's works of provision for us and that would create a space to hear God's voice. So let's start with a habit that would deepen our trust in God.

[22 : 32] We see all throughout the Bible God exhorts us to remember to remember God's works for us. And as a matter of fact, Jesus gave us this table, a sacred memorial where we remember and enact Jesus' death, life, and resurrection.

Over the course of hundreds of years, the church has given us practices to help us remember God's active presence in our lives. One of those is called the Daily Examen, E-X-A-M-E-N.

It is to be done at the end of a day. A really great time of day to do it is just before you fall asleep. The things we think about right before we fall asleep are often the things that are close to our hearts, aren't they?

They're the idols that we covet, the things we desire, things that we think would bring us happiness. or there are deepest fears. And the examine pushes those things out of our minds and brings God to the forefront.

There's basically five steps to an examine. The first is to become aware of God's presence. Become aware of God's presence. It's helpful to remember that God is a Father who is always waiting for us, always ready to welcome us, no matter what we've done.

[23 : 55] The second step is to review the day with gratitude. Now there's four different things that will come to mind as you review the day.

All right? The first is ways that you have obeyed God. And when that comes to mind, give God thanks for the strength to be able to obey. The second is ways that you've failed God, ways that you've sinned.

So confess those things, ask for forgiveness, and move on. The third thing is a way God has shown his faithfulness to you, how he's provided for you, a way that God has shown up and it's been obvious.

And a fourth thing that will come to mind is a time when God didn't seem to be there. A difficult time in trial. And you didn't notice his presence.

And then you look to see ways that God was present even in that difficult situation.

[24 : 58] Like, wow, this, even despite like the pain or the sadness of the situation, this person really cared for me. Right? Or I, my prayers became more passionate, maybe more angry, and God seemed really much more real to me than he ever has.

So, beware of God's presence, review the day with gratitude. Third is pay attention to your emotions. The fourth is choose one feature of the day and pray from it. And the fifth is to look toward tomorrow.

Now, if you fall asleep while you're doing this, like, if you don't finish and you fall asleep, don't feel bad. What father or mother would feel hurt or offended if in talking to the child in their arms, the child falls asleep?

What a gift to be able to fall asleep during the examine. Now, the examine is a practice you can do as a family. I know that not every one of us here has children, but I think this will still be helpful for you if you can't remember five steps, you can remember this.

The fact that we go throughout the day and we experience God in both positive and negative moments in our lives, that's a paradox, right? And paradox sounds like a pair of ducks.

[26 : 29] And this is a, this duck is dirty and this is a, this is a clean duck. And our, our family does the examine every day, every time we sit down for dinner together and we say, okay, what were your yay ducks?

And what were your yuck ducks? And the kids love it. They love to talk about the positive things that happen in the day and then we talk about the negative things that have happened in the day and

then we help the children to see, well, okay, that might have happened, but did you see how like, mommy really cared for you in that situation?

Isn't it great that God has provided you a mommy that's like really loving, generous, compassionate, like, or, or in that situation you had to stay at your friend's house. Isn't it nice to have a friend?

See what we do? Now, with all of the change our family has gone through the last six years, this has been a helpful practice in keeping God's goodness at the center of our thoughts.

As a family, we've seen God's presence and faithfulness every day in all situations. It's been a practice that's helped us to know contentment. All right, so that's the first practice, the examine, or yay ducks, yak ducks, however you choose to remember it.

[27 : 44] And the second practice that we're going to talk about is a practice to help us hear and listen to the word of God, and that's called the Lectio Divina. There are many variations on this practice.

The one I like to use is produced by the Irish Jesuits, and it's called Sacred Space. You can find it at sacredspace.ie, and they frame it as a structured way of entering into a disciplined, fruitful silence. Let me review the second steps. If you forget it, just go to sacredspace.ie. It's that, because it's produced by the Irish Jesuits. So the first step is entering into silence. Relax, slow down, and become centered in Jesus.

Let the thoughts and the stresses of the day go. Be still. The second step, encounter the presence of God. Jesus says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me. Jesus always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me, even before, even more than my most intimate friend.

[28 : 51] The third step is freedom. I remind myself that there are things God has yet to teach me and I ask for the grace to hear them and to be changed by them. The fourth is consciousness, which is really the examine, which we've just discussed.

The fifth is scripture. So I take time to read a scripture passage slowly, a few times. Now, what word, a phrase, captures my attention? So like, enjoying a piece of hard candy, I slowly let that word or phrase slowly circulate in my mouth as my tongue explores and savors its surface.

I allow myself to dwell on anything that strikes me. The sixth is conversation. What feelings rise up in me as I pray and reflect on this passage? I imagine Jesus himself sitting in a chair opposite me and I open my heart to him and share with him my thoughts, feelings, and reflections.

And then I conclude. It's the seventh step. With this, now may the God have peace through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead, our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep.

May he equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. The idea of listening may be nerve-wracking for many of us.

[30 : 12] I don't know about you, but to sit down and to be silent by myself causes anxiety. The staff has been doing the Lectio Divina now for a while and still, like, every time I sit down to do this, my heart rate goes up.

Ah, this is so quiet. I need to be doing something or looking at something or hearing something or what have you. But over time, I've really looked forward to this time because I know it's going to be a time where I'm really richly fed.

It also might be nerve-wracking because it begs the question, if I listen to God, what am I going to hear? Is it going to be the sound of my voice? Is it going to be the voice of Morgan Freeman? The exhortation to listen to God is very much the same as listening to a spouse or friend, okay?

So we go to Scripture and we listen the same way we're to listen to a friend, discerning what is my friend really trying to say in the things that he's telling me?

Does that make sense? Like, what's really at the source and core of what he's trying to communicate? That's listening to God. Offering to God the hospitality of listening is the opposite of giving God the pitiful offering of an instant of our attention.

[31 : 33] It's relinquishing our arrogance, inclining toward God, and offering to Him our whole being. Speaking of anxiety, you might feel some anxiety as we talk about this because you feel guilty or ashamed.

Because you know you should do this and you haven't done it. Or you don't do this enough. Or you don't see how you could ever possibly do it because life and circumstances seem to prevent even a moment of silent reflection.

I totally get you. Okay? I feel this too. And here's what you and I both need to remember. These practices have never bought anyone favor with God.

Because Christianity is not about what we do for God. It's about what God has done for us. The Father is always waiting for us, ready to give Himself to us.

Isaiah chapter 30 verse 18, what we heard earlier, says this, Therefore, the Lord waits to be gracious to you and therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you.

[32 : 51] For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all those who wait for Him. God shows us His justice in that everything we could feel shamed about or guilty over He's taken care of on the cross.

There's no judgment or wrath or disapproval that awaits God's children. There's nothing left of that. We go to Him in silence not to give but to receive, to receive a work that's already been done for us, accomplished for us, the work of Christ's life, death, and resurrection which has brought us into God's family and into the relationship with the Father.

Coming to Him in silence is not climbing a high chair and hoping to receive one or two small spoonfuls of God's grace. Coming to Him in silence is jumping into an ocean of God's grace.

That grace is what awaits us in returning and rest, in quietness and trust. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Lord, we would want to be holy.

[34 : 25] We recognize that as your calling in our lives. So we first thank you for making us holy, for declaring us forgiven, for declaring us justified, for declaring us to be righteous because of what your Son did for us.

Give us faith to receive that. And then give us faith to pursue you in silence and then to be pursued by your word, to be read by it, changed by it, and transformed by it.

God, thank you for speaking to us through your word and for speaking to us and transforming us by your sacrament. We look forward to that even now.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.